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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a recent study of the literacy practices in New Zealand and Australia. Through the voices of students, teachers, administrators, parents, state agency persons, and university faculty, the literacy programs "down under" are heard and seen. The paper also discusses programs for special needs children and briefly presents reforms currently underway. The typical classroom culture in New Zealand (where all children are mainstreamed) stresses continual development of a child's abilities, rather than accommodating fixed abilities. In Australia, the Labor Party currently in power has made education a top priority and funding is exceptional--educators, however, express concern that in the next election this funding will cease. (NKA)

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Literacy Down Under: Voices from New Zealand and Australia

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Abstract

In this paper a recent study of the literacy practices in New Zealand and Australia is described. Through the voices of students, teachers, administrators, parents, state agency persons and university faculty the literacy programs "down under" are heard and seen (through a Powerpoint presentation at the conference). Programs for special needs children are discussed. Lastly, reforms currently underway are briefly presented.

Literacy "Down Under": New Zealand

Background

In New Zealand, children enter kindergarten on their fifth birthday regardless of the calendar month in which the birthday occurs. They move to the next grade level via social promotion. Since there is a strong inclusion policy in New Zealand schools, flexibility exists within the system. For example, *vertical grouping* occurs where year 1, 2, and 3 children stay with the same teacher for an extended period of time. This grouping is family-like and helps provide a support system as the children develop naturally.

Daily Literacy Two-Hour Block

Classroom schedules in New Zealand schools include a daily literacy block of two hours each morning. This time is devoted to guided reading, writing, shared reading, independent silent reading, reading aloud, small group work with the teacher, large group work with the teacher, and independent work. In most instances, teachers and students read an entire book in one sitting, keeping the instructional emphasis on making meaning. Typical class size is 30 children.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is done on a daily basis in New Zealand classrooms. The goal is to model appropriate reading behaviors, expose students to a variety of different genres, and again, to promote enjoyment of literature. Reader's theater is often used as a reading aloud activity. At other times, the teacher reads a favorite book to the entire class.

Shared Reading

The goal of shared reading, a technique developed by Don Holdaway, is to extend exposure to print in a non-threatening way so the reader enjoys the book. Shared reading experiences extend throughout the week. For instance, on day 1 the teacher works with a small group of students and introduces a new book. Then they read the book together and complete a follow-up activity. On subsequent days the students return to the book by re-reading it in small groups, alone, or in pairs.

Guided Reading

The goal of guided reading is to help students develop positive attitudes toward reading. A secondary goal is to help develop word identification and comprehension strategies, but to do so in a way that is brief and does not distract from the enjoyment of reading.

The teacher plays a central role in guided reading and works with a small group of children. The teacher introduces the text and sets a purpose for reading. Then students read a section of the text and discuss it with the teacher. This process is repeated until

the entire text is read. By using this process, the teacher and students "think" their way through the text.

Writing

Writing is taught simultaneously with reading. Students are given daily practice in writing through a variety of means such as language experience approach, writing responses to what was read, story writing, and informational writing. Process writing is used for publishing student written materials. Writing is always shared with the class and with others at the school.

Materials

No textbooks are used. Students read a variety of books that are written at their instructional level. Teachers, who are required to do a monthly running record on each student, determine instructional levels. This information, coupled with teacher observation, helps to determine the reading level of the student, which changes frequently. Most books are color coded according to stage of reading development (emergent, early reader, fluent reader). The New Zealand Ministry of Education advocates the practice of book leveling.

Summary

The most striking feature of literacy instruction in New Zealand is the close fit between the text and the reader in terms of: the text's level of difficulty, the child's interest, and the child's prior knowledge. Classrooms are truly print-rich, inviting places. The attitude of New Zealand teachers is that *all* students can learn to read, and they *expect* this to happen. The typical classroom culture stresses continual development of a child's abilities, rather than accommodating fixed abilities. Since all children are mainstreamed in New Zealand, this attitude is paramount.

Issues in New Zealand

New Zealand is addressing a number of educational issues. First, the country has experienced a huge influx of immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands over the last 10 years. A large achievement gap exists between the indigenous people of New Zealand, the Maoris, when compared with white New Zealanders. Similar achievement problems show up in recent immigrant student populations. The focus on print literacy has caused Maori children to stop using the Maori language. Recently educational policy shifted to encourage the use of the Maori language both at home and at school.

A second issue deals with poverty. Poverty does exist in New Zealand, and schools are funded according to their "poverty level" as determined the government. In addition to government funding, most schools do supplementary fund-raising.

The third issue involves the status of *all* teachers as professionals. In New Zealand there is a large gap between the salaries of secondary teachers and primary teachers. The gap is linked to teacher education. Secondary teachers must go to the

university for teacher training, and they receive a university degree. Primary teachers are not required to attend a university, and many choose to obtain their teaching credentials from alternate teacher education providers. Many of these programs do not offer full degrees and the quality of training varies considerably. Recently, the primary teachers' union fought for a pay increase and received it; however, now the pressure is for primary teachers to also have a degree in order to be qualified to teach.

Literacy "Down Under": Australia

Background

In the state of Victoria, Australia, as in other education systems around the world, the improvement of literacy levels is a high priority. Australia has taken seriously the international research indicating that students who leave their early years of schooling unable to read and write, make little gains in later years.

The Early Years Literacy program was developed to address this concern through a comprehensive and strategic approach to literacy achievement in the early years of schooling. It involves implementation of a research-based literacy program, supported by multilayered professional development and a series of conferences. Statewide minimum standards for literacy have been identified and accountability processes established for all government primary schools. Significant funding has been dedicated to support the implementation of the Early Years Literacy Program.

Early Years Literacy Program

The Early Years Literacy Program is a resource for schools to assists them in planning a strategic and comprehensive approach to early literacy achievement in the *first five years* of schooling ("Prep" to Year Four). It consists of advice documents for teachers, professional development modules, parent programs and videos. It is being developed in stages. The Early Years Literacy Program is informed by the work of Victorian teachers and is based upon research undertaken by the Department of Education, Employment and Training and the University of Melbourne, directed by Professor Peter Hill and Carmel Crevola. The Early Literacy Research Project identified a whole school design model incorporating the following elements: a) daily, focused *two-hour* classroom literacy session; b) case management and careful intervention for 'at risk' students; c) strategically planned home/school partnerships; d) identification of an Early Years Coordinator at each school; and e) whole school commitment.

Today's Early Years Literacy Program is organized into four key components: a) the structured classroom program; b) additional assistance for struggling students; c) parent participation; and d) professional development for teachers.

Special projects are currently being undertaken to determine the supports and challenges of implementing the Early Years Literacy Program with Koorie and ESL students and the supports available for them. The effective and appropriate use of learning technologies in the Early Years Literacy Program is also being explored.

Reading Recovery in Victoria, Australia

Most primary schools in Victoria have implemented strong Reading Recovery programs. Reading Recovery provides one-to-one intervention for students who, after one year of schooling, have not yet established effective reading and writing processes.

First developed in 1976 in New Zealand, the Reading Recovery program initially set out to explore the range and variability of reading and writing behaviors in six-year old students identified as exhibiting marked difficulties. As a result, 'at-risk' students began receiving a daily thirty-minute Reading Recovery lesson in addition to the regular classroom reading and writing program.

The Reading Recovery intervention for each student continues until they have developed strategies that will allow them to participate effectively in the reading and writing activities in their classrooms. This usually takes between twelve and twenty weeks.

Essential to the Reading Recovery program is the inservice training for Reading Recovery teachers. These experienced Early Years literacy teachers participate in a year-long inservice program conducted by a specially trained Reading Recovery "tutor". The inservice training encourages teachers to: a) develop their understandings of the reading and writing process; b) become competent in the use of specific Reading Recovery teaching procedures; and c) critically evaluate their work and that of their peers. The training of Reading Recovery teachers is the responsibility of fully qualified Reading Recovery Tutors. Prior to appointment, Tutors undertake a year-long training program that covers both theoretical and practical areas of literacy development.

Research in Victoria and around the world has convinced the Early Years Program that Reading Recovery is the most successful intervention program available to schools. It has been operating in Victoria since 1984 when 14 schools implemented the program. In 2000, 1080 Victorian government primary schools are providing Reading Recovery Programs.

The Middle Years – A Guide for Strategic Action in Years 5 – 9

In addition to the State of Victoria's Early Years Literacy Program, a Middle Years Literacy Program has been undertaken to provide resources for schools regarding the middle years of schooling. This effort includes professional development and conferences, as well as a strong research component.

Middle Years Research and Development Project

The Middle Years Research and Development Project has been commissioned by the Victoria Department of Education, Employment and Training and is being undertaken by the Centre for Applied Educational Research at the University of Melbourne. It

involves in-depth research into 62 clusters of secondary schools and up to three of their feeder primary schools. The Catholic Education Commission of Victoria has funded one cluster. These clusters are developing, evaluating and refining a research and evidence driven whole-school approach to improve student learning outcomes in the middle years.

Within the 62 clusters of schools, 15 clusters will undertake specific research focusing on the areas of Literacy, The Thinking Curriculum, and Student Engagement and Well-being. These schools will demonstrate their achievements in the selected focus area and provide evidence of their capacity to implement the design (Hill & Crevola, 1997) to improve student outcomes in the middle years.

Middle Years Literacy Research Project

Another interesting research project is being implemented by Deakin University on behalf of the Victoria's Department of Education, Employment and Training. The Middle Years Literacy Research Project is working with twelve schools to assist Secondary English teachers, other Key Learning Area teachers and Year 5 & 6 Primary teachers to maximize their effectiveness as teachers of literacy within the English Key Learning Area in the mainstream classroom. This project is designed to improve literacy outcomes for all students, Years 5-10, particularly those experiencing difficulties.

You can view more information about the **Early Years** and **Middle Years** Literacy Programs at this web address: http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/litfocus/index.htm

For more information about the **Early Years** Literacy Program see also the following website: http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/eys

Writing

Focus on Writing is a new program for the teaching of writing in New South Wales implemented in 2000. It is for all teachers in all subject areas K – 12. This program recognizes "that learning to write involves developing skills, knowledge and understanding at all stages of schooling" (NSW Department of Education and Training). The theoretical base on which this program was developed is a social view of language (e.g. writing has a purpose and is meant to be read). Focus on Writing is one part of the State Literacy and Numeracy Plan. It is to be used in conjunction with Focus on Literacy and Focus on Literacy: Spelling.

The theoretical basis for this program is that texts are socially constructed. In composing texts, students need to critically understand the social purpose, social context and how meaning is constructed. The social purposes are two-fold: community purposes and academic purposes. "Community purposes" suggests the rich background from which students arrive at school. Students can come from homes in which there are strong oral story-telling traditions or homes with multiple languages. The school must build on these language knowledges and experiences so students develop communication skills that give them opportunities to communicate in writing with self, peers, parents, community members and local government. Academic purposes, on the other hand,

support the varied kinds of writing that are found within each subject area. Important to academic purpose is the concept that writers need to understand the purpose for which they are writing, who will read the text, and what the text is to achieve.

Social context, the second feature of the program, emphasizes subject matter, the role and relationship of those involved (i.e., writer and reader), and the mode of communication. "Subject matter" concerns the knowledge of subject matter that students need to have such as subject specific vocabulary, language structures and features that help them write within the subject. Role and relationship concerns how the writer wants to relate to the reader and an understanding of who the audience is. Mode of communication focuses on how to help the reader gain meaning from text (i.e., develop ways of introducing things into a written text that are meaningful for the reader who is not present).

The third aspect of the program is composing texts. The three core considerations for this area include: a) critical understanding of how meaning is constructed within the subject area; b) understanding of typical text features; and c) the need for flexibility of typical text features so the writer can make an impact on the reader.

Teaching of writing consists of focusing on composition of texts (taking into account the purpose and context of the task), processes of writing (process writing components), and the presentation of texts (technologies like handwriting, computer, spelling, punctuation). Instruction is to be systematic and explicit. Effective writing programs include teacher modeling, guided writing, and independent writing times.

Professional development on the Literacy and Numeracy Plan has been extensive. Teachers have developed many visuals that are present in their classrooms. Students are learning to write in a variety of genres.

Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM)

AIM is a new comprehensive assessment program in Australia. The focus of this program is to help teachers better measure student achievement. It was developed to specifically measure and lift students' numeracy and literacy skills. The components of AIM include: a) classroom assessments, b) homework guidelines; c) comprehensive reporting; d) a learning improvement program; and e) statewide testing. AIM is designed to assist teachers in boosting learning, improving teaching, and better informing parents. The program links assessment to teaching and learning programs. By having such a classroom program, students who need intervention can receive it early in their schooling. An important feature of the assessment program is that each teacher's diagnostic skills and accuracy of classroom assessment improve and become more comprehensive. Through staff development, classroom assessment also becomes more consistent across classrooms and schools.

Issues

As in New Zealand, Australia has issues to addresses. First, there has been a change in the national government. The Labor party (now in control) has made education a top priority and funding is exceptional. Educators express concern that in the next

election this funding will cease. The current plan of having each school become locally controlled and more accountable is likely to change with a new national government.

Second, Australia is experiencing a large influx of immigrants. Schools are finding that working with multiple languages is difficult. In addition to immigration, the growing aboriginal population is pressuring for acceptance of their culture. A small but increasing number of students is not reaching the national learning benchmarks. The new programs described above are expected to help address these students' needs.

Third, the size of the country and the location of populations make educating some Australian students a challenge. New South Wales is the largest school district in the world in terms of land coverage and number of schools (2,218 government schools and 905 private or parochial schools). Outside the urban areas along the coast, students are taught in their homes via radio and computer connections. Teachers may be actually with them only one or two days a term as the teacher travels from one homestead to another. Students from remote areas travel into Alice Springs once a year to meet each other and their teachers. Creating an academic program for these students is challenging.

Fourth, with all of the new program and assessment initiatives, Australian teachers have had to change their thinking about their work and way of teaching. Schools are in the process of redesigning organizational structures and roles as well as curriculum and assessment practices. Teachers are now expected to work in collegial teams, using different approaches, with different views about student needs.